
SPY CHIEFS

Volume 2

INTELLIGENCE LEADERS

in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia

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Intelligence Leadership in the Early Modern World

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Intelligence and espionage have been the subject of fascination for a long time. As a result, official and unofficial narratives of covert missions, undercover agents, and secret services have claimed substantial shelf space in libraries and bookshops, while the ever-appealing genre of spy fiction has featured prominently in book pages and on cinema screens. Historians have not escaped the charms of this constantly evolving scholarly domain and have ceaselessly striven to reveal the past's secrets and their keepers. This past, however, spans largely from the eve of the Great War to the Edward Snowden era, while more distant periods still remain largely unexplored.¹ This is not to say that scholars have not made worthwhile attempts to explore and reduce this gap. Indeed, some excellent work has been done on the diplomatic and, by extension, intelligence operations of early modern states like England (and later Britain),² France,³ the Dutch Republic,⁴ the Ottoman and Austrian Habsburg Empires,⁵ Portugal,⁶ Spain,⁷ and the dominant Italian states.⁸

While in most of these states intelligence operations were organized by powerful individuals for the purpose of consolidating political power and control, Venice, as this chapter will show, organized an intelligence service that was centrally administered by the government. Indeed, in an exemplary display of political maturity, Venice created and systematized one of the world's earliest centrally organized state intelligence services. This was responsible for the methodical organization of bureaucracy, diplomacy, and centralized intelligence that supported the city's commercial and maritime supremacy.⁹ At the helm of this process was the Council of Ten—Venice's spy chiefs—who, through an elaborate system of managerial delegation, masterminded and oversaw the clandestine activities of a great variety of professional and amateur spies and intelligencers.

Utilizing freshly discovered material from the Venetian State Archives and the Vatican Secret Archives, this chapter will shed light on how the Council

of Ten pulled the strings of Venice's centrally controlled intelligence operations. A long-overdue analysis of the council's centralized administration and corporate-like leadership practices will demonstrate the effective organization and the masterful system of rigid managerial delegation they employed in their efforts to administer Venice's intelligence operations. Subsequently, the chapter will focus on the Ten's remarkable ability to engage politically excluded commoners in politically significant clandestine missions, often with no financial benefit to them. In doing so, it will reveal a hitherto unknown facet of Venice's popular classes. Finally, the last section of the chapter will offer an evaluation of the Ten's leadership abilities as Venice's spy chiefs.

Overall, drawing on sociological theorizations of secrecy and discussions of the amorphous "Myth of Venice"—the contemporaneous view that the common good triumphed over private interests in the Venetian Republic—this chapter will contend that the Ten's efficacy as spy chiefs was due to their effective construction of an exclusive community of followers sharing a collective identity that was premised on secrecy and, by extension, the principles of reciprocal confidence and trust. To incentivize participation, the Ten tapped into the commercial predisposition of Venetians, turning intelligence into a mutually beneficial transaction between rulers and ruled. Ultimately, to legitimize their actions, they made a public virtue of active contribution to the public good. In consequence, this chapter will show how the Ten's leadership practices, which resulted from the heavy institutionalization and growing bureaucratization that pervaded the politics of Venice in the early modern period, bore a remarkable resemblance to both the "transactional" and "transformational" styles of contemporary leadership practices.

The Spy Chiefs of Renaissance Venice

"Once did she hold the gorgeous east in fee," wrote the great Romantic William Wordsworth about Venice.¹⁰ This is because by the mid-sixteenth century the Republic of Venice had built a maritime empire with hegemony over the most strategic trade routes between the Levant and the Mediterranean world. This supremacy enabled Venice to control the market in luxury commodities like spices and silk from India and Egypt, which she defended zealously.¹¹ As a result, and owing to its strategic geographic position midway between Habsburg Spain and the Ottoman Levant, Venice gradually metamorphosed into a bustling emporium of traders, goods, and news.¹² In fact, Venice, had already turned news into a commodity by the mid-sixteenth century, with the circulation of one of the world's earliest newspapers, the *gazeta della novita*.¹³ This was a monthly news publication targeted at merchants, informing them

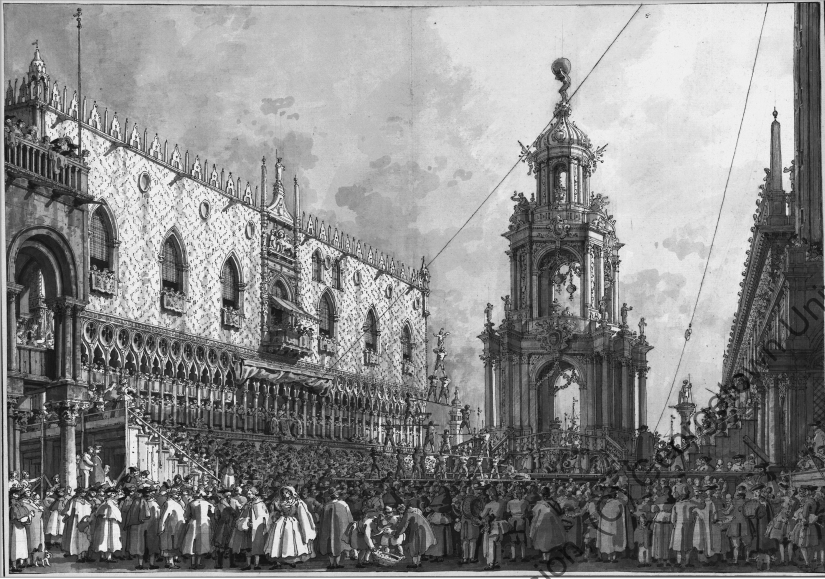


Photo 2.1 The “Giovedì Grasso” Festival in front of the Ducal Palace in Venice, 1765/1766, by Canaletto. (Wolfgang Ratjen Collection, Paul Mellon Fund, National Gallery of Art)

of political events that could interfere with their business pursuits.¹⁴ It is not accidental, therefore, that the most famed line from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, “What news on the Rialto?” sparks the report of the commercial debacle of an alleged shipwreck.

It is within this commercially charged political setting that Venice’s spy chiefs constructed its centrally organized state intelligence service. Established in 1310 under Doge Piero Gradenigo, the Council of Ten was the exclusive committee responsible for state security. Within its jurisdiction were secret affairs, public order, and domestic and foreign policy. The council was actually made up of seventeen men, who included ten ordinary members, six ducal councilors, and in the chair, the Doge. Every month three members took turns at heading the Ten’s operations. They were called *Capi*, the heads of the Ten.¹⁵

Initially, the Ten were tasked with protecting the government from overthrow or corruption. Progressively, however, their powers extended to such a degree that, by the mid-fifteenth century, they encompassed Venice’s diplomatic and intelligence operations, military affairs, and other legal matters of state security. Such weighty responsibilities, so central to the city’s governance, merited a prominent place in the city’s topography. The Ten, therefore,

were housed in one of the most impressive state intelligence headquarters of the early modern (and even the modern) world, the Ducal Palace, overlooking the Venetian lagoon in Saint Mark's Square. There the Ten organized and administered the world's earliest state intelligence service. In a way, this resembled a kind of proto-modern public sector organization that operated with remarkable maturity. Its organization comprised several departments, including operations, science and technology, and analysis.¹⁶ This service was also supported by several other state departments, including the Senate, the *Collegio* (an executive branch of the government), and the office of state attorneys (*Avogaria di Comun*).

Gradually, the Ten, together with the *Collegio*, assumed almost complete control of the government.¹⁷ This, inexorably, gave them the bad name of being authoritarian. Indeed, the autocratic way in which the Ten wielded their power tarnished their reputation. Their infamous eruptions were committed to ink by several contemporaneous chroniclers, such as the inveterate diarist Marino Sanudo. "This Council imposes banishment and exile upon nobles, and has others burned or hanged if they deserve it, and has authority to dismiss the Prince, even to do other things to him if he so deserves," he once wrote in his account of Venice's quotidian existence.¹⁸ The Ten's alleged authoritarianism stemmed out of respect for two fundamental Venetian values: order that was achieved by secrecy and maturity that was guaranteed by gerontocracy. Both these virtues were deemed paramount for state security.¹⁹ It is not a coincidence, therefore, that the Ten's stringent regulations did not exclude the council's members. As the responsible body for state security, if they failed to act speedily on issues that imperiled it, they became liable to a 1,000-ducat fine.²⁰

In a way, the Ten seemed to espouse Machiavelli's maxim that a prince "must not worry if he incurs reproach for his cruelty, so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal. By making an example or two, he will prove more compassionate than those who, being too compassionate, allow disorders which lead to murder and rapine."²¹ Yet their authoritarian tendencies were not left uncontrolled. The extraordinarily mature Venetian political system endeavored to contain any potential autocracy, at least in principle. The institution of the *zonta* (the Venetian linguistic variation of *aggiunta* or *addizione*, meaning "addition") was the mechanism put in place for that purpose. The *zonta* was an adjunct commission of fifteen men participating in all important assemblies of the Council of Ten. Either elected or co-opted, they played the role of an arbitrary referee whose duty was to recognize and combat instances of nepotism and cronyism. It was usually made up of patricians who had not secured election to the other exclusive governing bodies. The *zonta*, therefore, was a "constitutional shortcut" for those noblemen who

wished to actively participate in Venetian oligarchy but had not accumulated the necessary backing.²²

By the beginning of the sixteenth century several significant state affairs, like the ongoing war with the Ottomans and the specter of the new Portuguese spice route, rendered the protection of state secrets a matter of urgency. As a result, in 1539 the Council of Ten, with the blessing of the Senate and the Great Council (the assembly of the Venetian aristocracy), decided to establish a counterintelligence authority. This took shape in the institution of the Inquisitors of the State.²³ Initially titled “Inquisitors against the Disclosures of Secrets,” the State Inquisitors were a special magistracy made up of three men, two from the ranks of the Ten and one ducal councilor.²⁴ While they were primarily responsible for counterintelligence and the protection of state secrets, gradually their activity encompassed all aspects of state security, including conspiracies, betrayals, public order, and espionage.²⁵ All of these were expected to be concealed under a thick mantle of secrecy.

Secrecy, a State Virtue

Secrecy was one of the most important virtues demanded by the Ten. This is because, to them, it epitomized harmony and civic concord.²⁶ In a miniature island of 150,000 inhabitants,²⁷ rumors and fabrications, especially those exposing conflict and dispute, were precarious for domestic security. Thus they ought to be concealed at all costs.²⁸ As such, Venetian patricians who sat on government councils were forbidden by law to reveal any disputes or debates arising during assemblies. Disobedience was punishable by death and the subsequent confiscation of all personal possessions.²⁹ This stringent legislation made up for the lack of a royal court, where sensitive information could be confined and safeguarded. In practice, however, secrecy was far from achieved in Venice. In a city so obsessed with news, chatter circulated through the maze of Venice’s canals and labyrinth of streets at great speed.

Ironically, while the Venetian ruling class was ordered to keep quiet, the Venetian ruled were urged to speak up. In consequence, gathering and divulging information that pertained to state security was considered an act of good citizenship. If citizens became aware of potential threats to the stability of the state, they were urged to inform the authorities through formal denunciations. These were to be left in any public place, including churches, the stairs of state buildings, even the doorsteps of government officials. These denunciations were treated with utmost solemnity by the Ten.

To facilitate this process of state control, by the late sixteenth century the authorities had invented the premodern version of surveillance cameras, the

infamous *bocche di leone*.³⁰ Sculpted in the shape of lions' mouths—as their name indicates—and resembling carved carnival masks, these were postboxes into whose orifice denizens were invited to deposit denunciations on any issue of public order and security. Venetians took to this “I spy with my little eye” pastime with great zeal and even paid for the services of professional scribes, as the documents' immaculate penmanship reveals.³¹ This had tragicomic implications, as the inveterate informers could not see a distinction between major and minor threats. As a result, a blizzard of worthless reports flooded the Ducal Palace on a daily basis. To contain their frequency, in 1542 the government passed a law whereby, to be valid, all anonymous denunciations had to be signed by three witnesses.³²

This impediment did not have the intended effect, and the craze for this tell-tale game assumed gigantic proportions and lasted until the fall of the Venetian Republic in 1797. This is because the authorities were eager to reward worthy revelations.³³ As a result, the city turned into what can be regarded as a “Big Brother” studio, where nothing escaped the ears and eyes of the numerous self-appointed spooks.³⁴ These denouncers penetrated all social circles and reported on anyone and anything that could pose a threat, from gamblers and suspicious foreigners to potential heretics and foreign ambassadors.³⁵ A well-known victim of denunciation was the infamous Venetian womanizer Giacomo Casanova. In 1755, aged thirty, Casanova was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in the Ducal Palace's *piombe*, the terrifying cells reserved for political criminals. His conviction was a result of several denunciations by aggrieved husbands, religious devotees, and righteous city dwellers.³⁶ His crimes can be summed up as insatiable promiscuity, sensationalist religious sophistries, and a libertine lifestyle, all of which were deemed threatening to state security. Ironically, Casanova's mischievous disposition—that led to his spectacular prison escape just over a year after his arrest—not only set him on the path to stardom but also to the Venetian authorities' payroll as a professional secret agent.³⁷ The interested reader can find enthralling details of this story in his oft-reprinted *Histoire de ma fuite (Story of My Flight)*.³⁸

Central Intelligence Administration and Corporate-like Leadership

So, how did the Council of Ten and its subordinate body, the Inquisitors of the State, manage to collect the intelligence necessary for the Venetian state's domestic and foreign security? This became possible through the spies and informants they employed. Before getting acquainted with these information procurers, it is important to contextualize intelligence in the early modern

period. What exactly was intelligence at that time? Was it a state affair or a private initiative? A professional service or a civic duty? An act of institutional loyalty or financial need? In early modern Venice, intelligence was all of the above. For Venetians, the word *intelligentia* meant “communication” or “understanding.” Within the context of state security, it indicated any kind of information of a political, economic, social, or cultural nature that was worthy of evaluation and potential action by the government. But how did information arrive at the Venetian intelligence headquarters?

The Council of Ten was responsible for the central administration of intelligence-gathering and espionage in Venice. To this end, the Ten masterminded and oversaw a network of professional and amateur informers that branched out into three key communication channels: the *professional* channel, composed of the official diplomats and state servants; the *mercantile* channel, made up of Venetian merchants located in commercial hubs of strategic significance, like the territories of the Levant;³⁹ and the *amateur* channel, whereby individuals at all levels of society, either anonymously or disclosing their identity, for a fee or gratis, gathered and disclosed information relevant to the security of the state. To be sure, disentangling hard facts from rumors and fabrications was not an easy task. Yet the existence of these channels enabled the systematic evaluation of information through a process of comparing and contrasting.⁴⁰ Depending on the channel, a plethora of formal or informal spies and informers were recruited for intelligence purposes.

The Professional Communication Channel

“An ambassador,” once wrote Henry Wotton, “is an honest man, sent abroad to lie for the good of his country.”⁴¹ The Venetian ambassador, as the official formal representative, was the most obvious professional informant. The gradual systematization of bureaucratic and administrative processes in the early modern period owes much to the organized information networks of embassies. Venetian ambassadors were instrumental in this process.⁴² Tasked with three primary responsibilities—representation, negotiation, and the collection of information—they had mastered the art of covert communication from early on.⁴³ Indeed, Venice was one of the first Italian states to establish resident embassies abroad.⁴⁴ By the sixteenth century Venice had managed to secure permanent representation in all leading states of early modern Europe, and its ambassadors professionalized the act of clandestine information-gathering and reportage. They did so through their meticulous composition and dispatch of detailed intelligence reports that were often written in cipher to ensure secrecy.

Ambassadors acted as the heads of intelligence operations within the territory of their jurisdiction. To successfully fulfill their responsibilities, they

employed and managed their own spies and informers. These were paid for by a discrete budget granted to them for “secret expenses.”⁴⁵ In 1586, for instance, the Venetian ambassador in Spain reported to the State Inquisitors that he had “recruited” a blue-blooded spy from within the royal Spanish entourage. The new recruit’s compensation was in kind, particularly in fine muscat wines, as his status precluded monetary bribes.⁴⁶ High-class informers from the Spanish court were quite eclectic in their choice of compensation. In 1576, the Venetian ambassador in Madrid communicated to the Ten the desire of Antonio Pérez, Philip II’s secretary of state (who was just about to fall from grace by being accused of treason) to acquire a “good old” painting of Titian’s in exchange for “great benefits” for Venice. The council unanimously agreed to disburse 200 ducats for this purpose.⁴⁷ The gift must have borne fruit, as two years later the Ten decided to increase their spending on Titian’s art to 500 ducats in order to keep the secretary gratified.⁴⁸ Could any of these rewards be Titian’s *The Fall of Man*, now at the Prado?⁴⁹

The *professional* communication channel of Venice’s intelligence service was not solely restricted to formal exchanges between ambassadors and the ruler, as was the case with the other Italian states.⁵⁰ This channel was so meticulously organized that its highly sophisticated diplomatic network branched out to officially appointed representatives in the Venetian-dominated regions of the Balkans and the Mediterranean (the *Provveditori*); the Venetian cities of the Italian mainland (the *rettori*); and other Mediterranean regions where there was a notable Venetian merchant presence (the *consoli*) but no formal diplomatic representation. Intelligence-gathering and espionage were considered part of these envoys’ responsibilities. Accordingly, they were expected to recruit and manage their individual spies and informants.

In July 1533, for instance, while the war with the Ottomans was imminent, the governor of Zante received direct orders from the Ten to send a “practical and faithful” messenger to Admiral Andrea Doria, the legendary Genoese mercenary commander (*condottiere*). During the first half of the sixteenth century, Doria had been the nemesis of the Ottomans in the Levant, patrolling the Mediterranean and launching several naval expeditions against the Turks and other Barbary corsairs.⁵¹ It was obvious that the Ten had a top-secret message to convey to Doria, as the governor was ordered to refrain from written communication with the messenger, most probably for secrecy purposes. In consequence, he was advised to find an informant who spoke Turkish or any other language that Doria spoke, in order to forgo the need for an interpreter. If the latter was unavoidable, the governor was instructed not to use a well-known Genoese translator who was also in the Ottomans’ employ. The Ten expected reports on the progress of the mission in cipher.⁵²

On a similar note, in July 1574 the Ten requested from the rector of the Venetian city of Brescia the whereabouts of a certain Giulio Sala. Sala was suspected of treasonous dealings with the Spanish and was believed to have involved his cronies in his machinations. The Brescian authorities were asked to locate him and ship him off to the prisons of the Ten while keeping a close eye on his relatives and acquaintances. They were also ordered to change all the guards on the city's gates, most probably suspecting that Sala could have bribed them in order to escape.⁵³ Ordering the alternation of the guards' shifts, so that they were constantly placed at different places on the city's walls and forts, was a common tactic employed by the Ten to prevent the guards' collaboration with potential traitors.⁵⁴

Venetian governors were given even more daring clandestine missions. In July 1570, as the Papal representative in Venice reported to Rome, it was learned that the Ottomans were engineering the seizure of Spalato, a Venetian colony in Dalmatia.⁵⁵ A secret missive was dispatched to the local governor, containing eight bottles of poison. The lethal liquid was intended for the contamination of the water supply of the advancing Ottomans. The governor was instructed to be extremely careful in carrying out his mission so that the quality of the water of the Christian population living there, and thus its safety, was not affected.⁵⁶ Indeed, sanitation was one of the Ten's top domestic security priorities.

Even the Venetian consuls who were stationed in cities with no permanent diplomatic representation were tasked with the provision of vital intelligence.⁵⁷ Consuls were not formal diplomats but acted as intermediaries between Venetian envoys abroad and the intelligence headquarters in the Ducal Palace. Thus, on several occasions they oversaw the safe exchange of letters between the Ten and the designated Venetian diplomat in the region.⁵⁸ Their responsibilities could also extend to intelligence missions if this was considered necessary by the Ducal Palace. At the close of the sixteenth century, for example, the consul of Aleppo in Syria received direct instructions to gather information on Turkish affairs (and a large reward).⁵⁹

All these instances demonstrate that the *professional* channel of information-gathering and reportage that the Council of Ten had devised was complex. Yet the Ten managed it through a meticulous system of delegation. The Venetian spy chiefs did not micromanage their underlings. They delegated and expected detailed reports on execution—more often than not in cipher—trusting that their appointees would successfully carry out the job. As the central executive committee, they also oversaw the effective communication of information about significant developments to all their delegates who could benefit from it, not just the ones directly involved in the events concerned.

When a major diplomatic scandal nearly broke in 1574, for instance, because the French ambassador refused to surrender a Venetian turncoat who revealed state secrets to the French, communication was sent not only to the Venetian ambassador in France, but also to the *bailo* (the Venetian ambassador in the Ottoman capital) in Constantinople. The former was instructed to appeal to the king of France for a “more dexterous” ambassador; the latter was charged with communicating the events to the sultan, who was always interested in French affairs.⁶⁰

Finally, in a good example of modern-day business leadership, the Venetian spy chiefs were generous in acknowledging their trust in their underlings. “We are convinced of your utmost prudence in assigning this undertaking to a person of trust, as befits such a mission,” they informed the governor of Zante when they asked him to find a messenger for Doria.⁶¹ “We applaud the manner in which you ‘bought off the soul’ of Feridun Aga, as a person who can advance our interests in that Porte. And we approve of the manner in which you presented the affair. You are granted permission to render him your informant,” they wrote to the *bailo*.⁶² This system of delegation of duties, infused with qualities of trust, acknowledgment, even reward, set the Venetian apparatus apart from those of other Italian states’ intelligence operations. Those were restricted to direct communication between rulers and their ambassadors, without the systematized contribution of other formally appointed intermediaries.⁶³

The Mercantile Communication Channel

The intelligence network that the Venetian spy chiefs created with such refinement was not confined to the diplomatic and political sphere. In a less formal yet equally meaningful manner, Venetian merchants and businessmen who were frequent travelers in the Mediterranean and the Levant made up the *mercantile* channel of intelligence-gathering and reportage. As adroit dealers in goods and news, Venetian merchants were aware of the value of good (and at times covert) intelligence for competitive advantage.⁶⁴ They thus made perfect undercover spies for the Venetian authorities. In 1496, for instance, at a time of diplomatic turbulence between the Ottoman Empire and Venice, the young merchant and future Doge of Venice Andrea Gritti was residing in Constantinople. In the absence of a *bailo*, who had been expelled a few years earlier when he was discovered to spy for the Spanish,⁶⁵ Gritti took the reins of diplomatic negotiations. In 1497 he convinced the sultan to overturn the embargo on grain export that the Ottomans had imposed on Italian merchants in Constantinople.⁶⁶ In 1503 he successfully negotiated the final details of the peace treaty between Venice and the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁷ His diplomatic missives to the motherland were overflowing with intelligence on the size and

moves of the Ottoman fleet. To divert suspicion he coded his dispatches in commercial jargon and presented them as business communications instead. Once, he sent a letter informing the authorities that commercial goods were arriving in Venice from sea and land. The actual meaning of this report was that the Ottomans were preparing to attack with their fleet and army.⁶⁸

Constantinople was a strategic hub of both economic and political significance for Venice. It was not surprising, therefore, that Venetian merchants living in the city doubled as covert informants or spies for the Republic. Leonin Servo, a Venetian subject of Cretan origins, was a merchant residing in the Ottoman capital. With an impressive network of connections and knowledge of current affairs, he acted as an informer to the bailo and the Ten throughout his residence in that city.⁶⁹ In July 1566 he notified the bailo that Ibrahim Granatin, a favorite of Sokollu Mehmet Pasha and a foe of Venice, was en route to the city. The news had already reached Venice a month earlier and had caused uproar among the Ten,⁷⁰ who ordered Granatin's assassination as a top-secret priority.⁷¹ So dexterous was Servo in smuggling covert communications to Venice that he allegedly hid letters of the bailo Barbaro in hollow canes and transported them on board his ship.⁷² Often even when not on official covert missions, Venetian merchants considered it their duty to pass on news of any suspicious maneuvers of enemy ships, especially from areas of the Middle East where they were stationed.⁷³

The Amateur Communication Channel

In the early modern period, Venice was a maritime and commercial empire. Unlike other European states, its ruling class—the patricians—were first and foremost merchants who made their living through trade. The citizens, the “secondary elite” of Venice,⁷⁴ followed in their footsteps.⁷⁵ And of course, in a city of craftsmen and traders, the popular masses had been spoon-fed a steady diet of capitalist ideals. Within this context, the business shrewdness of Venice's spy chiefs devised several ways to benefit from the personal intelligence-gathering pursuits of all layers of Venetian society.⁷⁶ These even included individuals of different ethnicities and religions.

Jews made perfect undercover agents for the Ten, owing to their disenfranchisement as people at the margins of society and their much sought-after professional expertise, especially in medicine and commerce. In the next chapter, Emrah Safa Gürkan shows how the Jewish physician Solomon Ashkenazi smuggled the letters of bailo Barbaro in his shoes and shipped them off to Venice when the bailo was under house arrest.⁷⁷ At around the same time, in the 1570s, the Jewish merchant Hayyim Saruk from Thessaloniki was appointed to spy on “the affairs, designs and military equipment of the Turks” in Constantinople. For this purpose he even produced a self-made merchant-style

cipher, in which he coded the Ottomans as “drugs,” people as “money,” and dispatches as “purchases.” His compensation reached the staggering sum of 500 ducats at a time when the starting salary of a Venetian cryptanalyst was 50 ducats annually.⁷⁸

Intelligence concerned more than the city’s foreign affairs. Domestic security was of the utmost importance to the authorities, and this domain was overseen by the State Inquisitors. For this purpose, they maintained contact with distinguished individuals and well-connected professionals, whom they put on the formal payroll at times. Lawyers and notaries, who had direct access to their clients’ private affairs, formed part of this group. In 1616, for instance, a lawyer boastfully told the Inquisitors that “lawyers have the occasion of hearing many of their clients’ private affairs and, when a gentleman hears something concerning the interest of the state, he must at all costs let your Excellencies know about it.”⁷⁹ Of course, when the opportunity arose to fill their pockets, some of these gentlemen did not hesitate to leak information to the Spanish and French ambassadors, whose purse strings always became loose at the prospect of valuable information.⁸⁰ At times, the services of these specialist agents extended to duties more daring than the supply of information. In 1574, for instance, the professor of botany at the University of Padua was entrusted with the production of a deadly poison that was intended for a villainous Ottoman spy. When he botched the job, the Ten appointed a physician to carry out the task.⁸¹

More impressively, commoners of various backgrounds and occupations were directly or indirectly urged to take part in the Republic’s clandestine missions. Residents in Venetian subject territories were among the most sought-after informants owing to their local knowledge. In November 1570, on the eve of the war with the Turks, the mission of the Cypriot Manoli Soriano involved attacking the Ottoman settlements in the town of Skradin (situated in modern Croatia) and setting fire to the Ottoman fleet stationed in the eastern Adriatic.⁸² The authorities rewarded brazen acts in a variety of ways. Banished criminals, for example, were granted the revocation of their sentence in exchange for taking part in intelligence operations. To successfully carry out his daring mission, Soriano requested a squadron of three hundred men. As several of them were expected to be exiled convicts, the condition set was that, upon completion of the operation, their banishment would be revoked.⁸³

As this *commodification* of intelligence gradually put down roots in Venice, it became more common for banished felons to become secret agents in return for their freedom.⁸⁴ A striking example, in a later era, is, once again, the serial seducer Giacomo Casanova. Owing to his spectacular escape from the ducal penitentiary and the countless connections his dissolute lifestyle

had yielded, Casanova managed to get headhunted by the State Inquisitors. In consequence, for nearly twenty years after his daring escape from the city that subsequently banished him, when in need of cash Casanova offered his services to the Republic as a “secret agent,” hoping for a revocation of his expulsion.⁸⁵ For this purpose, he kept his eyes on anyone or anything that could be considered mildly suspicious. It took him quite some time to find a target until, in 1770, he exposed and halted the illegal operation of an Armenian printing house in Trieste that was competing with its Venetian counterpart. This was his golden ticket back to Venice.⁸⁶

Leadership, Identity, and the “Myth of Venice”

It is evident that Venice created an extremely efficient state intelligence apparatus that operated like a public sector organization. Notable for evolving processes of institutionalization and bureaucratization, this organization was steered by the Council of Ten, who acted as the chief executives. As mentioned previously, the highly developed management processes and central administration of the Venetian intelligence service rendered it unique among contemporaneous Italian and European states. Other states largely confined themselves to communication between the ruler and his ambassadors, in the case of the former,⁸⁷ or were organized by prominent individuals for personal advancement, in the case of the latter.⁸⁸ In a striking demonstration of organizational maturity, the Ten created a seamless system of managerial delegation that branched out into three communication channels, the *professional*, the *mercantile*, and the *amateur*. While it is easier to understand how the Ten managed the formally appointed delegates who made up the *professional* channel of communication—the ambassadors, the governors, and other state officials—what is striking is their ability to recruit and direct a large number of informally appointed spies and intelligencers from the ranks of Venice’s mercantile community and the wider public. A key question arises in this connection: How did the Ten get the public to cooperate in their state security pursuits, even when financial benefits were not guaranteed?

One definition of leadership implies persuading the collective to take responsibility for complex collective problems.⁸⁹ This accomplishment presupposes that the collective has accepted its position as the followers and is receptive to being led by the leader. Leaders, thus, cannot exist in isolation from a group of followers. In other words, a leader’s authority is sanctioned by the followers’ identification and self-acceptance as followers. According to this definition, leadership is premised on two prerequisites: the creation of a group

that followers can feel part of and wittingly situate themselves in,⁹⁰ and the mobilization of that group to proceed to certain actions that the leader deems necessary.⁹¹ In effect, leadership presupposes the social construction of the context that legitimizes a particular action by a group at a specific point in time.⁹² Using this definition, how can we evaluate the Ten's leadership?

Let us start with the first prerequisite, the creation of a group of followers. The foundation of any collective is rooted in a socially constructed, shared identity. Identity is not a rigid entity but "a social, contingent, discursive and dynamic phenomenon."⁹³ It is predicated on the creation of a *me* or *us* and a *them*,⁹⁴ which, by extension, erects social and cognitive boundaries between insiders and outsiders.⁹⁵ It is the responsibility of the leader to construct an identity that potential followers can share so as to become part of the intended group.⁹⁶ This is because only through creating a shared identity can a leader construct the group of followers that will advance intended strategies.⁹⁷ Were the Venetian spy chiefs successful in creating such a group?

Intelligence, as a social process, presupposes secrecy, one of the Ten's most revered virtues. Secrecy, as per its sociological theorizations, is instrumental in identity construction.⁹⁸ This is because it enables the creation of the boundary between two separate entities, *those in the know* and the *ignorant others*. The exclusivity of being *in the know*, compared to the *ignorant others*, can boost the sense of distinctive inclusiveness in a group and, by extension, cement one's identification with it.⁹⁹ Additionally, the social aspect of secrecy that requires and promotes the conscious awareness of the group owing to the intention of concealment and boundary construction can enhance the process of group identity creation.¹⁰⁰ The sense of belonging that ensues can potentially augment the need to protect and perpetuate secrecy so as to maintain the group. Secrecy, therefore, creates a dynamic and ongoing relationship between its agents and becomes both the condition and the consequence of the formation of group identity.¹⁰¹ By actively inviting ordinary Venetians to take part in clandestine communication of information even in informal ways, the Ten created an exclusive group of people whose common identity was premised on secrecy and, by extension, the principles of reciprocal confidence and trust.¹⁰²

This interpretation of the Ten's leadership challenges the conventional appreciation of early modern commoners as either devoid of political consciousness or rebellious against the state, owing to their exclusion from political participation.¹⁰³ In Venice a whole body of contemporaneous celebratory literature attributed the city's unique internal stability to the political exclusion of the commoners.¹⁰⁴ Even the guilds and their representatives were offered no political representation and were closely monitored by the authorities.¹⁰⁵ Still, are not anonymous denunciations and voluntary or even casual salaried

intelligence missions politicized (if not political) acts? What made people who were excluded from politics engage willingly—and more often than not without payment—in such pursuits, even at their own expense at times? In other words, how did the Venetian spy chiefs legitimize the necessary actions—the second prerequisite of leadership—required to advance their strategies?

“Identity,” claims one of the most eminent leadership literati, “is constructed out of the amorphous baggage of myth and the contested resources of history.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, to successfully instigate the construction of an identity that followers can share, the leader’s job is to create a shared vision for the present and the future and the sociopolitical conditions that necessitate and legitimize the followers’ action so as to achieve the intended vision. The Ten’s exhortations to the people, that still survive en masse in the Venetian State Archives, expressed the state’s consistent preoccupation with prioritizing the *servizio pubblico*, the public good, that was the mainstay of Venice’s security and serenity. Their bombastic pronouncements on this subject, that is evident in nearly every document they produced, from secret reports to public proclamations, proclaimed everyone’s obligation, prevailing over any private profit, to support the state’s efforts to uphold that vision of public good. Remarkably, the commoners’ denunciations and reports also expressed this belief in “the obligation of my loyalty” to the state.¹⁰⁷

This happy image of communal serenity triumphing over private interests and discrepancies was the essence of the famous “Myth of Venice.”¹⁰⁸ Although historiographical debates over the validity of the “Myth of Venice” are beyond the scope of this chapter, Venetian history abounds with instances of “community spirit” instigating action for the “common good.”¹⁰⁹ Empowering followers to pursue the leader’s intended vision through the creation of a collective sense of identity is the essence of “transformational” leadership.¹¹⁰ In effect, transformational leaders have the ability to inspire and motivate their followers to act for a shared vision. The Ten were adept at this style of leadership. But how did they manage to persuade Venetians to contribute to the collective good through their formal or informal involvement in clandestine undertakings?

To incentivize cooperation, the authorities mobilized the quintessential Venetian activity: trade. In a state where political and diplomatic activities influenced successful commercial transactions and vice versa, intelligence was turned into a trade of information for benefits. Espionage became a transaction between followers and leaders whereby the former expected some kind of benefit in return for services rendered, while the latter advanced strategic objectives by obtaining information. Enshrined in this *commodification* of intelligence, ordinary Venetians, who were excluded from political participation, developed a political purpose within the state, one that was masked

in the form of business.¹¹¹ The Ten employed what in contemporary leadership parlance would be called a “transactional” leadership style whereby the leader exchanges favors and tangible rewards for services rendered by the followers.¹¹²

Had all this taken place in a later era, the commercial character of early modern Venice could easily have made Benjamin Franklin snub it as “no longer a Nation, but a great Shop.”¹¹³ Adam Smith could have fallen into the trap of misperceiving it as a state of shopkeepers or, more precisely, a state “whose government is influenced by shopkeepers.”¹¹⁴ Yet Venetians were not devoid of sensitivity to state security, nor were they enticed solely by the lure of rewards. As recent scholarship has shown, ordinary Venetians saw it as incumbent on themselves to contribute to the common good. This predisposition stemmed from their communal sense of pride that was partly rooted in their professional identity.¹¹⁵ The thorough organization of the Venetian workforce into guilds facilitated this process.¹¹⁶ In fact, the government was notorious for inducing certain professional groups to perform particular tasks by presenting them as the privilege of service to the state.¹¹⁷ In the same way, the Ten presented the need for intelligence as the privilege of contributing to the security and posterity of the Serenissima, “the most serene of states.” Accordingly, reporting on anything that could pose a threat to the state, including the minutiae of daily life, became the discharge of one’s duty of contributing to the community. Indeed, a Venetian subject was made to feel obliged “to dedicate his everything, even his life” to the Republic.¹¹⁸ This was the “Myth of Venice” in full flower.

While the “Myth of Venice” was merely a compelling narrative intended to legitimize the Venetians’ cooperation in clandestine activities, it also reflects the Ten’s achievement in smoothly wielding two different styles of leadership: the transformational style by which they inspired their followers to take action, and the transactional style whereby they offered favors and tangible benefits in exchange for public service. In essence, the Ten’s followers were made to feel themselves to be an indispensable part of a state apparatus that operated for the public benefit—the preservation of the glorious Venice of the past and the future, a bustling emporium of commodities, prospering by its people working for its people.

This idealized portrayal of the Ten’s leadership is by no means the whole picture. It is doubtful that they or their delegates thought of any myth when going about their daily business. Their intention was not to construct a myth but to create what generated it, a community spirit that guided people’s actions toward the common good. If this intention developed into a myth, this is a different story. Even so, the discussion of Venice’s myth is unavoidable, as

“inevitably, whoever writes the history of Venice seems condemned to write the history of its myths.”¹¹⁹ In a way, the myth is to the historian of Venice what the *bocca di leone* is to the visitor to this remarkable city: an indispensable prop in the phantasmagoria of Venice through the centuries.

Notes

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29. Romanin, *Storia Documentata di Venezia*, 138; see also Archivio di Stato di Venezia (hereafter ASV), Consiglio dei Dieci (hereafter CX), *Parti Segrete*, Registro (hereafter Reg.), 3, cc. 2 recto/verso (hereafter r./v.) (March 3, 1529).

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32. ASV, CX, *Parti Comuni*, Reg. 15, c.54v. (August 30, 1542).

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46. ASV, *Inquisitori di Stato* (hereafter *IS*), busta (hereafter b.) 483 (September 1, 1586).

47. ASV, CX, *Parti Segrete*, Reg. 11, cc. 83r./v. (February 14, 1575, *more veneto*, hereafter m.v. Nb. The expression "more veneto" indicates that the Venetian calendar started on March 1st. All dates in this article follow that pattern).

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57. Preto, *I Servizi Segreti*, 208.

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106. *Ibid.*, 27.

107. ASV, CCX, *Lettere Segrete*, f. 11 (March 1597).

108. On the “Myth of Venice,” see James S. Grubb, “When Myths Lose Power: Four Decades of Venetian Historiography,” *Journal of Modern History* 58 (1986): 43–94; Elizabeth Crouzet-Pavan, “Towards an Ecological Understanding of the Myth of Venice,” in *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297–1797*, ed. John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 39–64.

109. Crouzet-Pavan, “An Ecological Understanding,” 57.

110. On a general overview of transformational leadership, see the classic by James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), esp. part 3 (Burns uses the term “transforming” leadership). On the link between transformational leadership and identity construction, see Bernard M. Bass, “From Transactional to Transformational Leadership: Learning to Share the Vision,” *Organizational Dynamics* 18, no. 3 (1990): 19–31.

111. Iordanou, “What News on the Rialto?”

112. On an introduction to the term of “transactional leadership,” see Burns, *Leadership*, esp. part 4.

113. Benjamin Franklin to Charles-Guillaume-Frédéric Dumas, August 6, 1781, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al., 41 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959–2014), 35:341.

114. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 2:129.

115. Ioanna Iordanou, “Pestilence, Poverty, and Provision: Re-evaluating the Role of the *Popolani* in Early Modern Venice,” *Economic History Review* 69, no. 3 (2016): 801–22.

116. See Mackenney, *Tradesmen and Traders*.

117. The Venetian shipbuilders, for instance, since they were responsible for one of Venice’s most significant industries, were granted the “privilege” of rowing the *Bucintoro*—the Doge’s ceremonial state barge—on festive occasions, guarding St. Mark’s Square during the Great Council assemblies, and patrolling the areas of Piazza San Marco and the Rialto Bridge during the evening. They were also the designated firefighters of the city. See Robert Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal: Workers and Workplace in the Preindustrial City* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

118. “spender l’havere et la vita propria,” in ASV, CCX, *Lettere Segrete*, f. 10 (July 7, 1583). The Republic of Venice was known from the Middle Ages as “La Serenissima”

(the most serene). The title “serenissima” was originally that of Venice’s supreme governing body, the “Signoria,” which was known as “La Serenissima Signoria” to indicate that it was a sovereign body. The Signoria was presided over by the Doge, Venice’s head of government, whose title derived from the Latin word “dux” (leader).

119. Crouzet-Pavan, “Ecological Understanding,” 57.

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